

October 31, 2021
Reformation Day

“Faith Does Not Boast”

Romans 3:19-28

The Law is good. Let’s get that out of the way right from the top. The Law, of which the 10 Commandments are really just a summary, is rightly comprehended simply as God’s perfect design of love for His creation. The Law upheld rightly is simply the creation totally loving the Creator first while also loving the rest of His created creatures. Love is embodied in the Law; thus, the Law is good.

That said, St. Paul makes pretty darned clear that when held up over and against a thoroughly fallen and sinful created humanity, the Law mainly does only one thing; shows us our sinfulness. This is why I reminded you that the Law is good. We have this awful tendency to see the Law as a negative thing because it speaks a truth we don’t like—we’re just awful human beings—and we don’t like that. The Law destroys our efforts to see ourselves in a positive light, and we’d rather blame the Law for that than accept the ugly truth of things.

But after clearly stating that truth, St. Paul moves to a much greater truth and gift—Jesus Christ, the only human being who was not an awful human being, but when held up over and against the Law was found perfectly righteous in the love that the Law mandates. And Jesus is this righteous human being not for Himself, but for us: *“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”*

We’re real good with that part. Clothed in Christ’s righteousness in our Holy Baptism we are joyful to receive forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Yes, the Law does its unpleasant work of driving us to sorrow, despair and repentance, but then the wondrous Gospel in Christ Jesus received by faith raises us up from the grave to salvation and life everlasting.

It seems like a nice little wrapped up package there, Law and Gospel, but St. Paul continues. *“Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded.”*

Boasting? Boasting? Where does that come into the picture? We just had sin and forgiveness, Law and Gospel; why is Paul bringing up boasting? He continues, *“By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”*

And we’re like, “Exactly!” On this day of all days I know it’s not works that gain salvation! Works righteousness is that Roman Catholic thing that Luther’s reformation rallied against. I know better. I’m Lutheran. We all would say that, right?

Problem. “Saying ‘I’m Lutheran’ in such a manner—that’s kind of boasting. Bear with me here. When we’re discussing the Reformation and denominational beliefs and we blurt out “I’m Lutheran,” that is necessarily throwing up something about yourself, that “I”...with a little bit of pride maybe. That’s a boast.

Think about that. In a religious conversation discussing Muslims, Buddhists, Shinto, agnostics and atheists might we not spout out “I’m a Christian!” with a bit of thinking that truth makes us a cut above? That’s boasting. We might say “I go to church every Sunday” or “I tithe” or “I do such and such for the church” and it’s true, but it’s also a boast. And those examples

might make you raise an eyebrow, but then there are the more obvious ones. “I would never wear a skirt that short to church!” “I deserve more attention from the pastor.” And a big one today, “I’m offended!” as in “How dare someone say or do that to me, of all people.” Yeah, boasting is a big problem...among Christians.

Why is it such a problem? Well, for one, boasting ignores the Law! Every time you say “I this...” “I that...” “I am...” “I did...” To that “I” the Law responds with “You????!!!” “Really, you!!!!?? YOU???” “You sinful disobedient wretch!” “You self-aggrandizing failure!” “You complete and utter catastrophe as a human being!” “You don’t measure up at all.” So there’s that.

But Paul doesn’t exclude boasting on the basis of the Law. “[*Boasting*] is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.”

You see the other thing, the main thing that “I” leaves out of the picture is the object of our faith, the person, work and grace of Jesus Christ the Lord. Christians have this annoying way of getting all religious and churchy while leaving the main thing, the grace of God in Christ, somewhere off in the wings.

Just this past week it came up in Bible study how we’ll talk about our church, the wonderful people, the fun activities, the things our church does to help the community, how good looking the pastor is, and we’ll do this trying to attract and invite folks here. But then we’ll never talk specifically about the gifts given here; the forgiveness, life and salvation Jesus Christ lovingly gifts to His children here.

That has to be the center. He has to be the center. This is what the Reformation was all about—putting the Gospel of Christ back at the center of the church; the center of the faith. And we in the church are maybe at unique risk of forgetting this because, surrounded by the earthly trappings of religiousness and piety, we can more easily feel that “I’m doing it right” when you, most certainly sinner you, aren’t the one doing any of the important Gospel stuff. Only He is.

This is why boasting must be excluded by the law of faith. Where does faith look? To Christ crucified! In faith we really can’t be saying “I am a Christian” unless our thinking is rightly along the lines of “I am His Christian,” giving Jesus all the credit for the grace that has made you so. You can’t say “I am a Lutheran” in faith unless your spirit is humble thankfulness that by grace you’ve received His pure Gospel Word entirely as a gift of love—a gift you yearn to be accepted by all who call Jesus Lord. In faith, your “I” cannot stand in judgment of others, because YOU stood guilty as sin and it is Christ alone who purchased your pardon. In faith “I am offended” really has to stop in its tracks and rethink things, because Jesus bore all your offenses to the grave in steadfast love and a yearning that you, you offensive you, be saved for eternity.

St. Paul breaks all this down in saying, “*For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*” Works of the law are all about “I”.

In faith, the pronoun “I” really doesn’t play a part. As soon as “I” rears its head, the Law accuses “you!” and “I” is toast. But faith says “You!” and looks to the Christ who has justified you, declared you “not guilty” and rendered the Law silent. Faith says “You died for me.” Faith says “You rose again for me.” Faith says, “You daily wash me and forgive me.” Faith says, “You love me this day, and love me right into forever.”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, beware of the pronoun “I” in your thoughts and words and in your works. A boast always begins with “I”, and boasting is excluded by faith. Faith looks to Christ. Doing that rightly “you” cannot boast because “you” have done nothing. And yet, in Christ, by grace, through faith, you stand forever a righteous child of the perfect God of love.

Amen.